

# **REPORT**

**by the Transport Committee of the  
National Pensioners Convention  
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## **Three Pensioners on a Southern Rail Journey**

**National Pensioners Convention**

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# Three Pensioners on a Southern Rail Journey

## Introduction

Discussions are taking place both at national and regional levels (notably in Govia Thameslink Railway - GTR) about the introduction of Driver Only Operations (DOO) train services and there is growing controversy about the feasibility and desirability of this concept.

Meanwhile the dispute over DOO on Southern Trains has been dominated and widely reported in the media as a problem for commuters when their journeys are disrupted by strikes.

The National Pensioners Convention Transport Committee is concerned that older and disabled people are being sidelined and we therefore decided to do some “on-the-spot” research into train journeys undertaken by pensioners.

Against this background and the evidence of research from both the Department for Transport and Passenger Focus that “older people and disabled people value the presence of staff above all”, a day was planned to test the practicalities of travel within the Southern network of an older passenger with so-called “normal” ageing problems, a wheelchair user and a blind person.

For the sake of balance and to minimise the effect on other passengers, it was decided to travel off-peak, and as far as possible to test rolling stock (Electrostars) and stations which would be most affected by DOO.

Although the wheelchair user involved usually books assistance, it has in the past proved to be so unreliable and, for the purpose of this scenario, unrealistic in a real-life journey so no pre-booking was arranged. The party did however make all “reasonable adjustments” such as arriving early, and making early contact with platform staff etc.

## **The Journey**

The journey started at East Croydon, and the ever-reliable Care Team were on hand to put down a ramp for the train. The accessible door lined up with an unreasonable gradient slope on the platform which was part of ongoing stage works in connection with raising platform heights. The ramp had been placed half on this steep gradient and half on the level of the platform to enable access for the wheelchair user. This would have been both dangerous and uncomfortable but for the Care Team's experience.

On boarding the train we found that the Help Point was locked shut and the passenger information systems were showing visual but not audible information, making journey information inaccessible to those with visual impairments.

The train travelled down the Arun Valley, which had been chosen as the line has very sparse station staffing, but is served by Rail Vehicle Accessibility Regulations (RVAR) compliant Electrostars of the type GTR would consider suitable for operating without on board staff "in exceptional circumstances". Staff were visible at Three Bridges and Horsham stations but nowhere else.

The train arrived at Barnham where we wished to change. The guard, although not hugely supportive, discussed our intentions, found a member of platform staff (seemingly temporary) who deployed a ramp (without positioning lugs) to enable exit. In the "exceptional circumstances" scenario we would have been unable to disembark, as the Help Point was locked.

We travelled on to Fishbourne on a Class 313 train which we were aware are too old (built in 1976-77) to have the technology needed for DOO, but in addition, it should be noted, have no toilets which is a major concern for many disabled and older people with "urgency issues".

The ramp was placed at Barnham by platform staff but Fishbourne doesn't have ramps. This is particularly unfortunate as a significant sum of money has been spent to widen the

platforms there to assist wheelchair users and other older and disabled passengers. However the guard deployed the ramp kept in the driver's cab, and both guard and driver were helpful and friendly.

Returning from Fishbourne it was necessary to cross via two very steep concrete ramps and the level crossing. We decided to use the Help Point on the Chichester bound platform but having arrived found the only Help Point was on the other platform. One of us returned to use the Help Point, but was disappointed by the response from the Call Centre staff, whose only suggestions were that we should have booked (which as stated is neither necessary or reliable), ring the Call Centre, or "ask the staff on the train"!

The 313 arrived (stopping short of the covered waiting area, presumably in view of the close proximity of the level crossing) so we nearly missed it. The situation was exacerbated by one member of the party who had been talking to the Help Point having to re-cross the level crossing. The train crew were helpful and the guard was excellent. The ramp was retrieved from the friendly driver's cab and kept in the accessible door ready for Chichester. Had there been no guard but only an On Board Supervisor there is no guarantee we would have been able to travel – unless the On Board Supervisors are instructed to stand on the platform at stations as a guard does today.

On arrival at Chichester, the guard again rescued us with the 313 ramp, as there were no visible platform staff to ask. Our intention was to change to the next Arun Valley Electrostar to return to East Croydon, but a search of the station found the one staff member selling tickets with a line of at least eight customers. He asked us to find the guard on the train for assistance.

The train arrived and at the accessible door we found the guard waiting with the on-board ramp and a pre-booked wheelchair user. Without fuss the guard de-trained the pre-booked passenger (who would have been carried forward in the "exceptional circumstances" scenario) and gave us access on the same ramp. He efficiently asked our destination and rang

forward before leaving the train with a cheerful farewell at Horsham. On arrival at East Croydon the Care Team again de-trained us efficiently.

Another member of our group was due to join us at our next destination, Belmont, where we were pausing for lunch. He has a visual impairment and uses a long cane. Due to a mix-up with the information systems on Victoria station, he boarded a train due to depart at exactly the same time as the one he was aiming for but not going to Epsom Downs!

Once on the train he was alerted by the Passenger Information System (PIS) of his mistake but by that time he was at Upper Warringham. The guard not only gave him oral directions but also printed a list of the train times and destinations on a ticket for him to show to other staff so he was able to join us only an hour behind schedule.

At Belmont station, on our return we tried to use the Help Point as we were aware the station was unstaffed. At first try the operator repeatedly asked where we were, which platform and why we couldn't contact staff. We were then disconnected. A second attempt was met with the same questions, being told to ring the Call Centre and that we should have booked in advance. Then another disconnection.

It is appreciated the Call Centre is outside the UK and that it is unrealistic to expect the operators to be aware that Belmont, for example, appears to have no staff, one platform and is the advertised station for the Royal Marsden Hospital.

By this time the train had arrived and the driver, who showed a very proper concern himself, after consulting the signalman, exited the train and he tried to use the Help Point in order to assist us. He had no more success than we did and after five minutes and in the interests of the effect this delay might have upon the evening peak service we released him with our thanks for his concern and for the credit he brought upon his employers by that concern.

We re-grouped at the restaurant where we had lunched earlier to research our options as the train only runs hourly. We were

recommended by the manager to get an accessible London bus to Sutton, which we did. It is interesting to note that neither London Buses nor London Underground (LUL) have developed a booking system, having presumably found technology (buses) and well trained staff (LUL) a more reliable route to accessibility. At Sutton station staff discussed with us our most practical route back to London, and adjusted it after realising that the original suggestion left from a platform with a broken lift. We then boarded a train to West Croydon and exited via a gated accessible route (one that we would not have found without help).

Neither the ramps used at Sutton nor at West Croydon (London Overground) had lugs to enable them to be safely secured (as required by RVAR).

We went on to board the tram to East Croydon which was another intuitive, easily accessed transport mode, with level access and conforming to RVAR.

The wheelchair user boarded an Electrostar from East Croydon thanks to the dedicated Care Team, heading to Littlehampton. The train was due to separate at Haywards Heath. These trains have no consistency in their layout; sometimes the front cars go to Eastbourne, on others the front goes to Littlehampton.

Even for non-disabled people this causes real stress and uncertainty; modern PIS systems that show the carriage number can help, but if the audio is switched off, or the driver too busy to reset correctly, passengers often find themselves in the “wrong” half. Usually the guards work their way through at least half of these trains, checking tickets and ensuring passengers are seated correctly, but moving through the train to relocate is impossible for wheelchair users so the skills of the Care Team in boarding and the guard in checking is crucial.

There are rumours about the future of station Care Teams (East Croydon and Brighton) which need to be investigated. Loss of these teams would be a major setback to the independent travel of disabled and older people. The wheelchair user was met at her destination thanks to the staff there having been contacted

from East Croydon, but the guard was standing by with his carriage key to use the on board ramp if needed.

### **Observations**

GTR have made a commitment for trains to have on-board supervisors on all trains except in “exceptional circumstances”. The concept of “exceptional circumstances” is not one that would enable any disabled or older person to travel with confidence. It was very clear from our journeys that, at almost every stage, without the presence of staff we would have been unable to continue to complete a journey or would have been carried beyond our destinations.

Our wheelchair user is concerned that the company may be relying on passengers with additional needs pre-booking journeys as a reasonable adjustment. It is unlawful to deny travel to “turn up and go” passengers (like aviation’s Regulation (EC) 1107/2006) but unlike aviation there is no robust system of data collection to ensure that pre-booking makes any difference to journey success. In fact the wheelchair user we met at Chichester had done so and was still reliant on the guard.

So we believe that if a train runs DOO to an unstaffed station with a passenger who is unable to exit the train unassisted, then an offence will be committed under the Equality Act 2010 in that it will be a “provision, criterion or practice” that puts a disabled person at a substantial disadvantage. This needs to be understood and acted upon both by the Office of Rail and Road (ORR) and the Department for Transport, who are also bound by the public sector duties of the Act.

After 30 years of commitment, effort and public expenditure to ensure that disabled people can travel by train, as by other modes, with confidence, we risk taking a significant retrograde step that will effectively deny people those hard won rights. That is simply unacceptable.

### ***August 2016: Transport Committee of the National Pensioners Convention***

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